

# Peter Becker

Munich, Germany

## A German Youth, Educated

### A Boy Mised

In 1941, Peter Becker was twelve years old, visiting his grandfather in Oranienburg, Germany, a suburb in the northern part of Berlin, when he saw people in prison uniforms clearing rubble in the streets. He watched them shovel the debris, their sweat trickling down their faces and making the neck and cuffs of their uniforms dark with grime and sweat.

"Who are they, Grandfather? Are they from a local prison?" he asked.

"No, they are inmates from the concentration camp nearby," his grandfather answered.

"What's a concentration camp?" Peter asked.

His grandfather gestured for Peter to go back inside. "It's a special camp for the enemies of Germany, people who are trying to destroy Germany and its people. During times of war, we can't let political enemies run free, so they are in these holding camps awaiting trial."

Peter had no reason to doubt his grandfather, and it would be a great many years before he would understand the atrocities his German government had committed in concentration camps under Adolf Hitler's rule. Most Germans didn't know fully what was happening at the time, as they were fed a steady stream of information from the state-controlled media (meaning the government tells the news what they can say) that asserted Germany was reclaiming its greatness and winning the war against their European enemies, even through the final days of the war.

### Off to School

Peter Becker was born in Munich, Germany in September 1929. He was the oldest of four boys, and like most Aryan Germans (white non-Jewish people), at six years old his parents took him to be evaluated for entrance into school. The best schools were national boarding schools that had been established in 1933, but to get in, Peter had to be tested both physically and mentally, in addition to proving he was

full Aryan with no Jewish blood reaching back to his great-grandparents. Peter passed the entrance tests and soon found himself on a train with his mother to begin his rigorous education at the National Political Education Institution. His mother helped him check in, but quickly, Peter found himself alone with hundreds of other boys his age, following a tight daily schedule of academics, exercise, and other life skills.

Peter's days began to take on a pattern. Classes in the morning covered language, math, science, and history, then lunch, followed with time for homework and play. In the afternoons, they rotated activities, from learning to mend their own clothes, cleaning their shoes, playing in the countryside or swimming in the lakes nearby when it was warm enough.



German boys in a geography class, Germany circa 1935 (photo via ushmm.org)

In the evenings after dinner, Peter would often be required to attend presentations by speakers or to watch educational movies. The topics always emphasized the greatness of Germany to instill pride in Peter and his classmates. The movies also had a patriotic message. By the time he was a young teen, even though Peter hated being at boarding school, he was a proud German boy who believed what his classmates believed: Hitler was a great man in Germany's life, bringing Germany back to power and world prominence after being humiliated unjustly

after World War I. Hitler's picture was on the wall in every classroom, and they sang the German national anthem each day along with the Nazi Party song which was about clearing the way for German soldiers to create a better Germany and world, one line saying, "Millions are looking upon the hooked-cross [the swastika which was the Nazi symbol] full of hope, The day of freedom and of bread dawns!"

In each of the subjects Peter was taught, there was a thread of that patriotism. Only the parts of history that made Germany look strong were presented. In science and language courses, they emphasized the purity of Germanic culture, how it was the most superior race and other people groups were either contaminated or weaker by being lazy or cheats. He was taught those who were not Germanic were different and to be avoided to ensure that German blood remained pure, so that the German innovations of modern civilization would continue to thrive. He was not told out loud to hate others—he was taught that his people, pure Aryan Germanic people, were the best, and German order, discipline, and industry proved it. As the war began in 1939, the images the boys saw at school were full of marching soldiers and German pride and power. He never questioned the lessons as a boy.

### Back Home

At thirteen years old, Peter was no longer adjusting well at school. He hated the military-style schedule, and his parents brought him home to Potsdam to finish his studies. It was 1942, and the war felt like it was being fought far away from them, but according to the radio broadcasts, Germany was winning. Boys were required to participate in the local Hitler Youth Clubs, where they would learn to march and attend meetings where patriotic speakers would come and tell them about the war. Peter gathered with friends to talk and hang out during the meetings.

In 1943, Peter went with his family to see an opera in Berlin, and there, he was amazed to see parts of the city that had been bombed in the course of the war. Peter had no doubt the ruins would be rebuilt in an even grander style once the war was over. Even after facing that small hint of the ongoing war, life back in Potsdam was much the same as it had

always been. Food became scarce in 1944, but Peter and his family remained in their home, going about school and work just as they always had. They didn't realize it at the time, but the German military was losing ground on all fronts to the Allied Forces.



Bombed out exterior of the Ministry of Propaganda Building, Berlin, 1945 (photo via ushmm.org)

In 1945, two weeks before the end of the war, all that changed. Air raids began in Potsdam, and the raids destroyed over 80% of the city. The reports on the radio kept saying Germany was winning, but for the first time, Peter began to question if the reports were including all the information. The Russian army marched into Potsdam and fought with the German army in the streets. Peter and his family spent a week in the basement, avoiding gunfire, bombs, and other dangers. Several times a day, Peter or one of his family members would go upstairs to their fourth story apartment to make sure nothing was on fire.

The Russian army defeated the German army and began looting and attacking the civilians until Russian leadership arrived a few days later and established order. Peter and his family were now Germans living in an occupied state—troops from a foreign country making the rules and enforcing them. They started to pick up the pieces of their lives to try to make a living again and to make sense of what had happened.

The Russian troops had representatives to report any Nazi activity in the apartment buildings around Potsdam. Peter was hauled into jail twice, accused of being an important Nazi figure. Peter believed in Hitler's mission to guide Germany back to power, but he certainly hadn't had any real power to do anything

to help. He'd been too young to serve in the army. He was released and sent home both times. After the second time he was released, Peter and his family moved to Bremen where they hoped to be safer.

### Questions After the War

At first, Peter felt crushed by Germany's defeat despite his relief that the war was over. Wasn't this a repeat of what had happened after World War I? Europe and her allies had come, and Germany would have to start over again. He was angry that the Russians and Americans occupied their land and created restrictions on their activities.

As news from more outside sources began to travel into Germany, suddenly Peter saw and heard reports of the mass killing of Jews by Hitler and his armies. Peter couldn't believe it. Germany was a civilized nation, full of cultural and industrial innovation—how could they have killed so many defenseless people across Europe? At home and school, he'd been taught to treat people justly, with dignity, but some of the other ideas he'd learned in school started to confuse him in the face of such destruction. Peter mistrusted the reports.

"Surely they were wrong?" he thought over and over. "Everyone is just against us as Germans, as usual."

American troops remained in Germany after the war to both help the area begin to rebuild, but also to ensure Nazis could not regain influence or power. The American troops in Bremen organized youth clubs to give the teens and children a place to go and hang out as cities were being rebuilt. Peter attended the Bremen Boys Club that organized activities and speakers, but the message had changed. Now, Peter was hearing about democracy. The Bremen Boys Club and the lieutenant who led it supported Peter and his friends both with a safe place to meet, but he also supported them with their immediate needs. The lieutenant had connections with a family in the United States who coordinated clothing, money, and other supplies for the boys in the club.

Peter appreciated the clothes and funds being provided, and the ideas were interesting, but he still couldn't fully believe what reports were saying about the Nazis killing so many Jews. He met a young American history teacher who was attached

to one of the American schools established for the dependents of Americans living in Germany. Peter and the teacher had long discussions about Hitler, politics, and democracy. He felt safe to ask questions and share his ideas. Slowly, he was seeing history and the world through a lens much larger than the one his Nazi school days had given him.

One day he attended a traveling museum-like exhibit in Bremen that included artifacts and pictures taken at concentration camps across Europe. Peter was shocked at the brutalities he saw. The Nazi mission had been far darker than he'd realized. He remembered the people on his grandfather's street in prison uniforms. Now, the words concentration camp meant something more than jail. It meant brutal, inhumane treatment and often death.



Nuremberg Trials, Nuremberg, Germany, 1945-46 (photo via ushmm.org)

The Nuremberg Trials began in November 1945, and over the course of the next year, Peter listened to the trial on the radio and read the reports about their findings. The Nuremberg Trials were public military trials of Nazis who committed crimes against people across Europe during World War II. Peter was hungry to know what had happened. So much had been left out of the reports he and his family received during the war. He'd had no idea the man whose picture was on every wall of his childhood school had been so full of hate that he'd organized the oppression and death of so many across Europe. Peter was horrified that he had ever been proud to be a Nazi. He realized that he'd mostly been proud to be German, but

he hadn't realized what Germany stood for under Hitler.

Once the lieutenant in charge of the Bremen Boys Club was sent back to the states, Peter was elected by the group to keep up correspondence with the family stateside who'd been providing help. For two years, he kept up the connection between the American family and the Bremen Boys Club until finally, Peter felt bold enough to make a request. He asked the family if they would consider sponsoring him to come live in the United States, and they agreed.

### **Peter's Path to the United States**

Peter arrived in the United States when he was twenty-two years old. He lived in Rochester, New York, and worked for Eastman Kodak, a factory making cameras and other photography equipment. A year later, he was drafted into the U.S. Army and given a choice to serve and secure his citizenship in the U.S. or refuse to serve and remain on a work visa and forfeit citizenship. He agreed and began his military service.

When Peter concluded his time in the army, he had earned a G.I. Bill benefit which allowed him to go to college with most of his expenses paid. He attended the University of Chicago his first two years before transferring to the University of North Texas where he finished his Bachelor's degree in history. From there, he went on to graduate school at Stanford University in California.

Dr. Becker came to South Carolina when he was hired by the University of South Carolina to teach German history, and he remained in Columbia until his death in 2018.

In his later years, as Dr. Becker shared about his experiences in Germany, he continued to wrestle with the ways he'd been indoctrinated as a boy through the limiting of information and the insistent, unquestioning patriotic message he heard at every turn. He understood as an adult that leaders like Hitler rise during times of trouble and through their charisma and manipulation, they can quick-

ly cause immeasurable harm. In one interview, Dr. Becker stated, "It is painful to recall [the horrors of the Holocaust and the role of Nazis], and to be aware of how frail civilization is, how weak human beings are, and how human beings are capable of doing great and beautiful things at the same time they are capable of committing enormous atrocities. It's part of the human experience. The Germans were the ones who did it between 1939 and 1945, but other countries are capable of precisely the same things."

Source:  
Becker, Peter. Interview. SCE-TV and the South Carolina Council on the Holocaust, 1991.

# Peter Becker

## Teacher's Guide

If you haven't taught first person survivor testimonies before, we highly recommend reading [this guide](#) from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

### **Before you read:**

1. Define the Holocaust.
2. What is a first-person testimony or account?
3. What role do first-person testimonies play in understanding history?

### **Questions to think about as you read:**

1. Describe Peter's early school experience. What did he learn about Germany?
2. Why did American troops remain in Germany after the war?
3. What changed Peter's mind about Hitler?
4. How did Peter come to the United States?
5. Why do you think Peter chose to study and teach history for the rest of his life?

### **Final reflection:**

1. What will you remember most from this witness's story? How does it add to your understanding of the events of the Holocaust?